EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Washington state high school graduation rates have been in the news a great deal recently, as new studies have calculated the rates to be much lower than previously believed, estimating that nearly one-third of Washington students drop out before they graduate from high school. This paper responds to those reports.

- It analyzes graduation rates through a detailed review of district enrollment, dropout, and graduation data, and recommends data collecting and reporting strategies.
- It summarizes ways that dropout and graduation rates are reported and evaluated in accountability systems in other states and recommends accountability strategies for Washington State.
- It reviews the factors that cause students to drop out and the attributes of successful dropout prevention programs, and recommends dropout prevention strategies for Washington State.

WASHINGTON'S GRADUATION RATE

The authors' analysis of Washington State high school enrollment and graduation data estimates that **Washington State's high school graduation rate is 70.1**%. That is, only 70.1% of all students who enroll in 9th grade in a Washington State public school (excluding those who transfer out of the state or to a private school) graduate from high school four years later. This rate is similar to the rate estimated by a Gates Foundation-funded study conducted earlier this year, as well as with recent OSPI graduation rate estimates.

HOLDING SCHOOLS ACCOUNTABLE

States around the country have implemented a broad array of approaches to hold schools and districts accountable for dropout and graduation rates. Some states keep dropout and graduation rate reporting completely distinct from their academic accountability systems. Other states report dropout and graduation rates in their accountability systems, but do not evaluate these rates. Still other states report dropout and graduation rates in their accountability systems and evaluate school and district progress toward goals for these rates. The lessons learned by other states that have implemented different accountability approaches provide Washington State with useful guidance.

DROPOUT PREVENTION

Schools and districts that are successful in preventing students from dropping out share five basic attributes: they are aware of students' needs; they intervene quickly when students have problems; they develop mentoring relationships between adults and students; they offer students alternative opportunities to learn; and they pursue school reform when needed for large-scale change. Applying these attributes can help schools and districts in Washington State reduce dropout rates and increase graduation rates.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Following their research, the authors have developed five recommendations on dropout and graduation rate reporting and accountability for schools and districts in Washington State.

RECOMMENDATION 1:
Assign a unique identifier to every student as s/he begins school. Accurate data is the first step in dropout prevention. But the current database for Washington State enrollment is filled with duplicate and inaccurate records because of the difficulty of accurately accounting for students who transfer between programs and schools. Using a student's Social Security Number as a unique identifier would provide more accurate information about students and their needs.

RECOMMENDATION 2:
Use a cohort-based graduation rate as the key statistic in schools' success at helping students finish school, and report it using 7th grade enrollment as the baseline. Dropout rate calculations can be confusing, both because there are many different ways to report them (by year, over four years, in the population at large) and because it is difficult to determine accurately whether individual students should be counted as dropouts or not. This confusion can be avoided by making a cohort-based graduation rate – beginning at the start of middle school – the key measure of school and district success at helping students stay in school.

RECOMMENDATION 3:
Devote enough resources to the development of the P210 database to make it a usable resource for trend analysis within the next three years.
The discussion earlier in this report noted the inaccuracies and difficulties inherent in the P210 database. These problems are not at all unusual for a new data collection system, and, in fact, have been experienced by school and district administrators in a number of other states. Increasing the accuracy of that database by assisting data entry personnel at individual schools must become a priority.

RECOMMENDATION 4:
Use the authority provided by the Legislature to require schools and districts to report graduation rates in the state accountability system. After three years, determine whether specific evaluative measures or goals for graduation rates should be set.
Washington State should require that graduation rates (in the cohort format recommended earlier) be reported in the state accountability system. However, it is premature at this time to set goals by which these rates would be evaluated for specific schools or districts. Instead, the A+ Commission should spend the next three years working to improve the accuracy of the data that is collected and studying school and district rates, and should determine appropriate evaluative measures after that time.

RECOMMENDATION 5:
Use nationally-tested attributes of successful dropout prevention programs to focus on two groups of students: those who indicate (by behavior or grades) that they are at risk for dropping out; and those who have dropped out but can be helped to transition back into school.
Interviews with officials in other states offer simple steps that school staff can take to assist students at risk of dropping out. When combined with more comprehensive programs for students who have already dropped out of school, these actions can reduce the dropout rate in a demonstrable way.